

Feudalism in Iran

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Abstract: Presence or absence of Feudalism in Iran is one of the most important political and social issues since it is an important factor explaining this country's development or underdevelopment. A European feudal ownership is quite stable while that of an Iranian owner is quite shaky, and an owner might not only lose all his power and authority but also his ownership through changes in monarchies and dynasties. Lack of European Feudalism in Iran resulted from the presence of a hereditary monarchy in Iran which prevented the creation of powerful and independent groups and classes and instead established bureaucratic landholding system which resulted in controlling agriculture and trade which in turn prevented the development of capitalism and rationalization of bourgeoisie like what happened in Europe. In this connection, Karl Marx believed that feudalism plays a crucial role in historical evolution and development of a country and it is the foundation of capitalism development. On the contrary, oriental despotism and obstinacy is the main factor of historical underdevelopment of a country and its lack of growth.

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1. Introduction

Three theories have been discussed about feudalism as a historical period in Iran in since ancient era up to now. After explaining them we will discuss another theory besides them which is defended by the other and will offer our reasons to explain and prove it.

1.1. First theory: It is Marxist theory which knows feudalism as a kind of historical periods which almost has been somehow created and established in all countries and according to Anderson, "Feudalism in this version of materialistic narration is an instructive ocean in which every country is actually baptized (Reynolds, Susan. 1994). The history of each country or ethnic group has distinct and separate steps which include primitive communal society, slavery, feudalism and bourgeois and each of these steps follow each other with a indestructible order (Brown, Elizabeth.1974) . Therefore many Iranologists of the former Soviet which were impressed by the events analyzed Iran on this basis and exactly used the same terms and concepts of western sociology for the institutions and events of Iran history. For example the book titled as "History of Iran" which is written by a group of scholars of the former Soviet such as Grantovski, Danda Mayo, Petrusevski , Ivanov and Blue has analyzed different periods of Ancient Persia , Arabs invasion , the ruling of Umayyad dynasty and Bani Abbas , and the establishment of constitutional revolution , based on feudalism logic. In general, according to this theory, "feudalism is the system of exploiting relatives and rural peasants by feudal rulers, they believe that the

mode of production depends on its conditions" (Reynolds, Susan.1994).

2.1. Second theory: believes in separating the history of the world countries and thus considers feudalism as a special part of the world. This movement root traces back to Montesquieu who wrote: "It was an even that happened only once in the world and might never be repeated again." Voltaire took a stance against such an analysis and approached Marxists stance by declaring that "Feudalism is not an event, it is a very ancient form with different governments which is governing three-quarters of our hemisphere" (Poly, Jean-Pierre and Bournazel, Eric.1991). Karl Marx and Engels, influenced by Montesquieu, considered feudalism in their analysis as particular part of the world which is related to the history of Western Europe. After studying the history of West European countries such as Germany, France, and England they understood that these countries have passed communal and primitive historical periods, slavery, feudalism and capitalism and their future history will be manifested in socialism. The question that was raised for Marx and Engels was whether these historical periods existed in other areas such as the East or not. By doing some research on Eastern countries, including Iran, India, the Ottoman Empire, and china they found that these countries had their own special history and after the communal primitive period they have entered a period which is known as Asiatic mode of production or Eastern exploitation and didn't progress in this period historically, that is why Marx believed that the East lacked history. Marks believed that due to special climate and

geographical conditions and residential areas and lack of water to irrigate agricultural land, Eastern countries needed to dig canals and to build dams and to develop irrigation projects, which actually the central government was capable to deal with. Government control over water supplies and irrigating systems would cause domination and eventually ownership of agricultural lands and thus a powerful independent class which is called aristocratic landowner is not formed because the government will rent its own land to its servants and acquaintances and will take them back whenever it wants, thus aristocracy won't be developed and nothing as private ownership will be formed. According to Marx and Engels, Lack of formation of aristocratic landowner and private ownership in these countries will have a great effect on development of these countries because in absence of such aristocratic class, there won't be any power to stand against the government or control its power. Therefore, the government will dominate all aspects of the society, and insecurity is the main feature of such societies. Karl Marx believes that feudalism has just developed in West Europe where due to proper climate conditions and sufficient rainfall, there is no need to develop general irrigating system by the government. Sufficient rainfalls and enormous water, provides the required water for agricultural lands therefore there is no need for the government to interfere and thus aristocrat landowners will grow independently and will gradually stand against the government. Marx believes that this is the main factor of capitalism development since the independent powerful aristocrats stand against the government and their conflict provides a safe environment which in turn provides the best conditions for capitalism development.

3.1. Third theory: Hartsfield the preacher of this theory believes that the history of Iran is in fact, nothing except a succession of royal dynasties and governments. According to Diakonov, the contemporary historian of the former Soviet, although in Europe we are witnessing the evolution and development of history from feudalism to capitalism, Asia will still remain in feudalism and it seems as if Asian tribes and ethnics are not able to promote to a higher position. Of course this theory is not justifiable scientifically and logically because if we believe in feudalism in a country, it will naturally pave the way for a historical evolution and movement. Unless we believe in feudalism opposition which is Asiatic mode of production and Oriental despotism; since according to Marx this period prevents historical development and evolution by suppressing independent groups or parties.

4.1. Fourth theory: This theory is what the authors believe in. First of all, Marx and Engels' theory of Oriental despotism and Asiatic mode of production is accepted about the history of the East and it is believed that Feudalism couldn't be a general period for the whole world because if we believe so, then the underdevelopment of some part of the world will not be justifiable for us. This is what Anderson also believed in. He stated that "Marx was quite aware of the dangers of irregular expansion of feudalism beyond Europe and avoided to accept that the sultanate of India, Delhi or Mongol Empire were a social form of feudalism (*Bill James A. 1963*)." Second, as feudalism theory and its important indices such as private ownership and powerful aristocratic landowner cannot be generalized to entire world, Marx and Engels' theory of Oriental despotism can't be generalized to all Eastern countries, either. It seems that by concentrating on the history of Iran we find that the history of ancient Iran owns features and characteristics which are quite distinct from its later history which begins with the attack of Muslim Arabs to Iran. The history of Ancient Iran which typically began with the establishment of Medians and Achaemenids and continued until the collapse of Sassanid Dynasty owns the logic of Feudalism and can be analyzed and assessed with this perspective. While with the collapse of Sassanid Dynasty which typically began with the attack of Arabs to Iran a new era began which is more consistent with Marx and Engels' theory of Oriental despotism.

5.1. Feudal society of ancient Iran during Sassanid Dynasty

There is evidence about the feudal society of ancient Iran during the Sassanid era which will be referred to. One of the main features of feudal systems is the existence of independent and powerful aristocratic class. According to Karl Marx this class paves the way for capitalism development. In his book "The Spirit of the Laws", Montesquieu writes about the importance of aristocracy as: "Aristocracy is somehow a part of the nature of monarchy and its fundamental principle is that wherever there is no king, there is no aristocracy either, and wherever there is no aristocracy, there won't be any king except a cruel despot (Nomani Farhad. 1977)". If we believed in the existence of aristocracy in east authoritarian regimes, this class would mostly get pension and salary from central government and would depend on it. According to Marx, this class never became a powerful independent hereditary class because the nature of political power in the East was a barrier to the development of constant power centers. Sassanid inscriptions reflect the social structure of Iran and independent aristocrats so that "social status and positions were based on aristocracy

and the nobility of the ancestors and not based on the titles, and in some cases the names have been mentioned even without any title. But the reverse situation does not exist anywhere. This indicates that an individual was more valuable than a title and the person was the main factor but the title was just something arbitrary.” The characteristics of Sassanid aristocracy definitely distinguishes it from authoritarian societies of the East. Because this class has got its status and peerage out of the scope of the government while in authoritarian regimes of the East, aristocracy emerges from the heart of the government and might disappear as quickly as it appears. Aristocracy’s power weakened in the wake of events that occurred in the late Sassanid era. These events included catastrophic failure of the Pirouz I (459 - 484) "versus Heptalians in the East and paying taxes and tribute to them, drought and famine, Mazdak’s revolutionary movement and the invasion of aristocrats’ properties by his followers, and finally disputes among nobles themselves (Christensen, A (1971). Of course, it was important for the Sassanid kings to subdue aristocrats not to eradicate them. That is why, according to Pei rokoub , Ghobad granted glory and dignity to a person who was a member of aristocratic family and who well deserved it. Another important feature of Feudal system was the existence of private ownership by the aristocrats according to the rules and regulations and customs of these societies while it is not found in authoritarian regimes and as stated by Marx and Engels the government dominance over water supplies and irrigation system eventually led to the ownership of agricultural lands by the government and therefore no private ownership is found in such societies. Therefore there is no example of lack of laws or etiquettes in Sassanid era in Iran while the society was involved in a process in which religious laws were changing to compiled civil laws like what happened in western states therefore rules and regulations were greatly respected so that the famous Roman historian Ammien Marcellin declared: “Iranians are very afraid of the laws, especially fugitives from military service”. Of course some believe that in Parthian, Sassanid era we are not facing dynasties in special sense but we are facing some probably hereditary positions and posts which were studied as dynasties but were actually some posts or appointments□□. If this analysis is true, it represents an important principle of nobility, since a post in an aristocratic family has been inherited from generation to generation so that it is difficult to recognize, for instance, if Soren or Espahbod is the name of a noble family or an official position . It seems that there has been a direct relation between aristocratic families and official positions so that only

the nobles could get official posts and conversely, if the king could rule over the aristocrats and was able to grant posts to others, even in this case he couldn’t appoint low class people to such official posts. John Badan, the 17th century intellectual proposed the theory of sovereignty for the first time and separated government and sovereignty from each other. He believed that sovereignty is the way of governing society and thus he divided monarchy to three categories: absolute monarchy, aristocratic monarchy, and republic monarchy. The first one is a monarchy in which sovereignty or the highest political power is in the hands of the king and the government is also in the hand of his appointed agents. Those who think monarchy is the same as despotism refer to such monarchy. In second kind of monarchy, sovereignty is in the hands of the king and the society is governed by the aristocrats and in the second kind the society is governed by the people’s president. In fact, monarchy in Iran during Sassanid dynasty and even Ancient Persia was aristocratic monarchy because although sovereignty was in the hands of the king, society was managed and governed by the aristocrats. Enayatollah Reza quoted on behalf of Simulate that inheritance existed in official posts and also participation of nobles and aristocrats in managing the state and country affairs (Elton L Daniel, (2001). He also wrote: “ Bu studying the resources and references it is implied that during the reign of Sassanid kings, there had been disputes and disagreements between the nobles and aristocrats and the king which sometimes caused serious conflicts and quarrels between them(Elton L Daniel,. (2001).” It is quite natural that signing a treaty between the king and officials and fief holders is a feature of feudal systems. Because in each treaty there are two sides which have some rights and duties in relation to each other while in despotic regimes there isn’t any treaty or agreement because the tyrant is not supposed to be confined to these treaties. Another feature of feudalism is the presence of aristocratic landowners in their farmland which distinguishes it from the East despotic regimes. In these kinds of regimes , because of despotic power in cities , aristocrats or nobles try to live near the center of power to be always aware of different affairs so that their rivals couldn’t pull the rug from under their feet , while in feudal systems aristocratic landowners are less dependent on central government and their relationship with central authority is based on treaties and contracts which are necessary to be respected by both sides , therefore they don’t need to attend urban areas and power centers and thus they stay in their agricultural lands and behave as an intermediary between the government and the farmers. Although Iran needed artificial irrigation systems due to

geographical and climatic conditions, these systems as mentioned above were provided by aristocratic landowners and not by the central government. And this is an important point which has been ignored by many scientists and researchers. Finally another important issue must be referred to which indicates that Ancient Persia was not reflecting a despotic society in domain of science and cogitation because the idea of an ideal monarch prevented the establishment of political despotism.

7.1. Collapse of Feudalism in Iran

With the attack of Muslim Arabs to Iran, we witness the collapse of a civilization which can be explained based on feudalism standards some part of which were referred to before. Muslim Arabs were fundamentally in conflict with feudalism and its features and indices because it had no relation with their lives. Max Weber believed that the relationship between religion and its believers was a selective relation so that the believers finally would influence the religion and would seal it and would play a decisive role in its future (James Denham-Steuart (1767). Therefore whether we care for Islam which is based on the principle of belief and the formation of a united community or care for its believers and followers that is the Arabs whose lifestyle was ethnic and tribe-oriented, both of them are against the features of feudalism system. David Farahi believes that “political wisdom and power in Greece have risen from inside a triangle of limitation and scarcity and each of its three sides can be devoted to land, wealth, and philosophy (rational thinking). But power and wisdom in tribes and Islamic governments are limited to a triangle whose sides are formed by relatives and acquaintances, loot, and religious thought. Among these three, the Greece was more fanatic about their land, and Arab tribes respected supporting relatives.” He refers to this point that although the emergence of Islam caused some changes in the sides of the tribes, it couldn't eliminate the mentality of Arab tribes entirely so that it survived even after Islam. Thus Farahi's analysis of the features of power in Islamic civilization is quite in opposition to feudalism in the West. Like many other monotheistic religions, Islam advocated equality of all Muslims and it was quite natural the Muslim Arabs, who were still in elementary levels of a new civilization and couldn't comprehend the principle of labor division and specialization of tasks entirely, accepted this Islamic order completely and thus began to conflict with Iranian aristocrats and noble families. Moreover, Arabs lacked feudal ideology and they didn't consider land as a source of wealth and on the other hand the annihilation of these classes would pave the way for Iran domination. Saint Christian who believed that aristocrat's

weakness resulted in decline of Iran wrote: “The reason of the decline of Iran's nation was the principles of equality of people and classes and lack of a preacher among people that happened after the emergence of Islam in Iran. The followers of Quran could do what Mazdakian couldn't. Aristocrats gradually disappeared and their features and attributes also vanished. West Asia domination by Iran was based on very ancient political traditions which only aristocrats and clergymen knew.” Saint Christian believed that even though the trunk of Iran civilization tree was still standing with the survival of the peasants, that is second rate lords, the second reason of Iran's decline was the attack of the Turk to Iran after Arabs because the peasants were killed and disappeared in this attack. Meanwhile, Aristocrats in Iran didn't just own economic power but they had all nice and superior features of Aryan race in gaining knowledge and culture and art which, according to Saint Christian, resulted in West Asia domination by Iran. That is why in Aryan thought the evil ruling begins whenever ordinary people come to power. “These people have experienced through the history that whenever inferiors, who lacked racial, blood, intellectual or innate nobility, become the leaders of them, they provide everything for the evil attack and the evils will rule Iran and people misery will begin again in Iran (Frye RN, 2000)”. According to Tabatabaee one effect of this issue is that with the elimination of aristocratic families and the nobles, the chiefs of the tribes monopolized political powers and the servants got emirates so they weren't able to keep the political system and would lose their political power after at most two generations. Therefore with the elimination of powerful aristocrats and their absence in political scene of Iran, the governments were always radically despotic or extremely dissipated since this class kept the political balance during Ancient Persia era and prevented the government's slide towards the extremes. Another factor that led to the fall of aristocracy and feudalism in Iran was related to the law of inheritance which was taken from the religious laws of Islam. It was mentioned that Lambton in his book “Owner and Farmer” considered this factor very effective and important in the fall of aristocratic system because after a few generations, feudal lands were broken into small pieces and this led to the destruction of feudalism (Reynolds, Susan. 1994). On the other hand, the formation of despotic systems in Islamic countries prevented the formation of rational legal systems. Max Weber emphasized that only the West has a single rational legal system while Asian legal systems were despotic and arbitrary. In societies with ideology of feudalism and strong hierarchical settings, each person is given a special task and duty

and nobody has the right to interfere in other's affairs. Meanwhile addressing some jobs or affairs was beneath the king's and or aristocrats' dignity. A part of Feudal ideology of Ancient Persia was reflected in Zoroastrianism. As mentioned earlier, since its emergence this religion was the religion of the farmers who were fighting with invaders who had tribal lifestyles. That is why Zoroastrianism is not in favor of trade and business. Therefore the first class and group who tended to Mani religion were businessmen because this religion had a favorable opinion to trade and business and on the contrary was against farming and ranching (Frye RN, 2000).

2. Discussion

Unlike the theories which were established under the influence of modernity era in 19th century and considered the same stages in the development of human society and history and which were repeated again in 1950s and 1960s, this research somehow came to the conclusion that the history of each country has its own special features which cannot be generalized to other countries. This discussion was raised by the founders of historical sociology such as Montesquieu and Alexi Duetocoil and was approved of by a group of Marxist intellectuals such as Barrington Moore, Skotchdopole, and pier Anderson, who were known as history oriented Marxists. According to these movements, in order to know a society you should refer to the history of that society because there aren't any common patterns to be generalized to the history of all countries. Therefore it is concluded that each society has its own particular history and the institutions, conflicts and political trends in each society are the results of evolution and changes that occur in the history of that community. In this research it was shown that the history of Iran cannot be explained by general models and theories. The history of Iran can neither be analyzed by the logic of feudalism which was raised by Marxists nor can be entirely explained by Karl Marx and Engels' theory of Oriental despotism and Asiatic mode of production. The history of ancient Persia which is the peak of culture and civilization of its people can be explained by the logic of feudalism while the history of Iran after the attack of Muslim Arabs can be analyzed by the theory of Oriental despotism and mode of production. Of course this historical process

continued until the constitutional revolution in Iran in 1906 and since then other issues are discussed.

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